

Holland faces up to a mountain

Descending is an art in itself. It calls for precise steering, bravura, familiarity with the terrain and thinking ahead. You have to know when to touch the brakes and when to add some weight on the pedals. Simply lunging downhill isn't descending, it's crashing. Usually it results in serious damage. Dropping out. Injury. Disillusionment. For a descent, you need vision.

No doubt you think I am talking about the noble sport of cycling, and am about to launch into some a feeble analogy with civilization in decline. Not at all. Today's subject is the faith in architecture as an avant-garde of culture; and the way that faith is professed in the Netherlands, and is in a decline. The metaphor of the title is not mine, although I've twisted its meaning a bit. It comes from Aaron Betsky's latest eulogy of current Dutch design. The book he wrote together with Adam Eeuwens is titled *False Flat*, and every cyclist knows what that means. It's the last part of a mountain ascent, usually above the tree line. Through a strange optical illusion, you feel you have almost reached the top yet your legs tell you otherwise; although the landscape is practically flat, you are still climbing. Still, you know the end of the climb is within reach. It's the area where you may keep groaning, although the real suffering is over. And, indeed, this is exactly the situation in which Dutch architecture and design currently find themselves. Betsky intended something else by the metaphor, referring to a characteristic of design that an ostensibly superficial appearance may disguise considerable conceptual profundity. But that is the relief we know from the little humped bridges across Amsterdam's canals, or from viaducts in the polders of Holland; as you pass the top, a surprise greets you. But what I am talking about is real mountains. As you pass the top of the col, what awaits you is not a surprise but providence! False flat in the real world is usually the end of a climb, the final stage of making it to the top. You are still on the rise but you no

longer see it. It is indeed the period of eulogies, of self congratulation and the fanfare of success. But culture does not have finales at the tops of mountains, alas. On we have to go, on and on, and the descent is thus the inexorable fate. As in the uphill section, this is where the strong part from the weak, the smart from the stupid, the brave from the timid. The former sail through the air and define their own momentum; the latter veer off into the chasm, enslaved by gravity. For the former, fame is a rite of passage; for the latter it is the kiss of death.

And this is the very dilemma in which Dutch architecture now finds itself. For the policymakers, the die is cast. The heavy labour of the climb is forgotten and all hurtles downhill, barely noting the casualties by the wayside. Architecture policy has been declared unilaterally null and void. Some have mindlessly forgotten that they were not so long ago involved in a fierce battle for the lead, and have already started removing the crush barriers while the race is still in full swing. Even the successful architects have realized that they need to get out of there before they are mangled by the milling throng. And the rest of them are wondering more and more what they are doing in a race where the rules are changed before it is all over. Nothing is worse than getting mixed up during the descent with a public that is already making its way home, with the hung-over feeling that the event was hardly worth getting excited about and the race passed by far too quickly to justify the expense; the mountain meadow strewn with empty cans, coolbox empty, one flipflop lost, wallet nicked. Feeling stropy.

And, amazingly, while one crowd sets off downhill, left and right, another comes sweeping in the opposite direction up the mountain. There is incredible jostling. There is shouting and swearing. 'Where do you think you're going? You're going the wrong way, the party's over.' And the other say, 'If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed must come to the mountain.' Here, the metaphors collide. Here 'Archis is Undutch' begins...